



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE
1315 East-West Highway
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910
THE DIRECTOR

NOV - 3 2006

MEMORANDUM FOR: D. Robert Lohn
Administrator
Northwest Region

FROM: William T. Hogarth, Ph.D.

SUBJECT: Declaration of Unusual Mortality Event for Harbor Porpoises in the Pacific Northwest

At the request of NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service's (NMFS) Northwest Regional Office, the Office of Protected Resources (F/PR) initiated consultation with the Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events (Working Group) regarding elevated numbers of harbor porpoise (*Phocoena phocoena*) mortalities in the Pacific Northwest, particularly in the state of Washington. Since January 11, 2006, a total of 63 strandings have been reported: 2 were live-stranded animals and 61 were dead when first observed. Necropsies have been conducted on 59% of the animals (36 of the 63 harbor porpoises), but results are still pending for most of the cases. The previous maximum number of harbor porpoise strandings recorded in the Northwest was 34 animals in 2003.

Under the procedures of section 404 of the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA) (16 U.S.C. 1421 *et seq.*), the Working Group has concluded at least one of the seven criteria established for designation of an Unusual Mortality Event (UME) has been met. These mortalities are unusual because there is a marked increase in the magnitude or a marked change in the nature of morbidity, mortality or strandings when compared with prior records (criteria number one). Therefore, in accordance with the provisions of the MMPA, I designate you, or a person whom you deem appropriate for coordinating the response, to be the Onsite Coordinator and to coordinate the formal UME investigation team. The investigation team will need to review the existing data and sampling plans, and develop a response and investigation plan for this UME.

In addition, the Working Group has requested that NMFS and the UME investigation team do the following to the extent possible:

1. Compile the necropsy reports to determine if consistent pathologies are observed, and provide the reports to the Working Group for review.
2. Assess whether the increased number of strandings is related to: (a) increased monitoring or reporting effort in the areas from which strandings were observed, or (b) changes to the distribution and abundance of the harbor porpoise population -- *e.g.*, has there been a geographic shift of the population density or is the overall population increasing?



3. Examine the stranding reports from Oregon (particularly in regards to prior years for both numbers and locations of strandings) and obtain information on porpoise strandings in British Columbia, Canada, to reassess the geographic scope of the UME.

NMFS's Office of Protected Resources' Marine Mammal Health and Stranding Response Program (MMHSRP) will be responsible for facilitating consultations with the Working Group members and will assist the Onsite Coordinator with facilitating the investigation team. At least one member from the Working Group and the MMHSRP should be part of the investigation team. Mr. Trevor Spradlin (F/PR-MMHSRP and Executive Secretary for the Working Group) will work with the Onsite Coordinator to provide frequent updates for the Working Group to review, and to consult with the Working Group members throughout the investigation. If you have any questions about the Working Group or its procedures, please contact Mr. Spradlin, at (301) 713-2322 or Trevor.Spradlin@noaa.gov.

Attachment

Criteria for Determining an Unusual Marine Mammal Morbidity/Mortality Event
*Revised July 2004**

1. A marked increase in the magnitude or a marked change in the nature of morbidity, mortality or strandings when compared with prior records.
2. A temporal change in morbidity, mortality or strandings is occurring.
3. A spatial change in morbidity, mortality or strandings is occurring.
4. The species, age, or sex composition of the affected animals is different than that of animals that are normally affected.
5. Affected animals exhibit similar or unusual pathologic findings, behavior patterns, clinical signs, or general physical condition (e.g., blubber thickness).
6. Potentially significant morbidity, mortality or stranding is observed in species, stocks or populations that are particularly vulnerable (e.g., listed as depleted, threatened or endangered or declining). For example, stranding of three or four right whales may be cause for great concern whereas stranding of a similar number of fin whales may not.
7. Morbidity is observed concurrent with or as part of an unexplained continual decline of a marine mammal population, stock, or species.

* Revised at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Working Group on Marine Mammal Unusual Mortality Events